A Design Perspective on Nudging

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Although design thinking has become a buzzword in business and although human-centered design approaches are being explored in a range of public innovation labs concerned with developing and delivering citizen-centric policies and public services, nudging is rarely discussed for its design implications. What would such a discussion contribute and how may it help us focus on the potential benefits of a nudging approach? It would begin by questioning how nudging enhances or diminishes people's abilities to take deliberate action or to make informed decisions.

Every outcome of design, whatever final form it takes (i.e., an object, a service, a structure, or procedure, etc.) encourages us to do certain things and discourages us from doing others. A button invites us to push, a handle to pull. A chair invites us to sit down in a waiting room just as it does in a lounge or bar. We tend to dress up, lower our voices and sit more upright in restaurants where tables are covered in elegant linens and show off fine wineglasses. Designing for people concerns issues of human experience. Generally, this experience is more positive when clear designs indicate what needs to be done when and why.

Lawmakers and policy makers, too, are engaged in designing for people. Their laws and policies give shape to the everyday life of citizens. Consequently, they also run into issues of human experience. And yet, the current debate around nudging reveals that human experience is not yet taken into full account in their designing. So far, nudging simply denotes a particular approach to address a design problem, though the controversies arise from disagreement over what that problem is. Depending on what one views the problem to be, nudging takes the form of "nonintrusive intervention" or becomes part of the nanny state that plays "psycho tricks" on its citizens in order to manipulate them. These two interpretations provided by Towfigh and Traxler deserve a closer look.

"Non-intrusive intervention" is a curious term because what we find is that it concerns an intervention, which requires no changes to the political and legal or administrative systems. Non-intrusive in this sense is what organizational change experts refer to as an "accommodational change": a change whose main purpose is to keep things as they are. It is about "designing for fit", that is about designing to avoid any significant changes to or within the system. As Towfigh and Traxler observe, non-intrusive interventions currently promoted by nudging pay little regard to the experiences of citizens but function as tools for regulators in the regulation process. Moreover, this approach to nudging aligns with the idea that government has sole responsibility for policy design and policy implementations. Implicit in this interpretation is what Towfigh and Traxler detect to be a "soft| and "liberal" paternalism". Non-intrusive intervention simply continues the more and more questionable idea that citizens are the problem why

policies and laws don't work. Nudging serves as a tool for the system to get the unruly citizen in line. It expresses distrust in the citizenship and in the individual. If we don't trust people to do the right thing, we feel the urge to (however gently) "nudge" them in the direction we want them to go, whatever our motivation. Non-intrusive intervention in this sense serves as an excuse for experts to avoid any changes in their own thinking and doing. Nudging functions as an extension of an existing mindset.

Nudging as a form of the nanny state, of "psycho tricks" and manipulation is rooted in a rather narrow view of cognitive psychology. Donald Norman, a leading cognitive psychologist, explains how physical and visual cues of products afford certain actions and encourage people to do certain things. His book *The Design of Everyday Things* (1988) offers insights into the signals forms and materials send.[1] For example, a flat plate "affords pushing" while "an empty container affords filling" (p. 82). Relevant to our discussion of nudging is the fact that the original 1988 edition was published under the title *The Psychology of Everyday Things*. When we reduce design to psychological components, we do not have to be surprised when people feel subjected to "psycho tricks." When nudging is about responding and reacting, designers are not concerned with enabling people to understand why they are asked to do something and how they can accomplish this.

To move beyond these two controversial stances and to save what is worthwhile about nudging, we might want to think of "nonintrusive intervention" differently. Curiously, Sunstein and Thaler who triggered the nudging debate,[2] hint at this possibility in their book *Nudge*. However, they end up highlighting the cognitive work by Norman and giving short shrift to an alternative view by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, also a psychologist, whose work on "flow" identifies successful design outcomes as those that provide positive human experiences. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes "flow" as the "positive aspects of human experience–joy, creativity, the process of total involvement in life".[3] To "be in the flow" as identified by Csikszentmihalyi, our designs need to provide people with all relevant information in a language they can understand, in a place they can conveniently reach, at a time where the information is needed. To design for positive human experiences still means to employ cognitive principles though not for people to react, but for people to understand and to enable them to act.

Rather than "nudging" people to do "the right thing", the aim is to support them in their own informed decision-making and in taking their own deliberate actions. The purpose of these design activities is to arrive at outcomes that are usable, useful and desirable to people. This tends to be the case when people understand what they need to do, why and how they can get this done. When they have access to relevant information when they need it in a place they can easily access and in a format they can use. To design for these kinds of experiences and interactions means to embrace the challenges everyday citizens face, for example when they engage with government services, forms and procedures.

Designing for “non-intrusive intervention” in this latter sense often requires a different mindset among the people involved in designing and within the organizational systems design takes place. It requires new skills and new thinking, even a “design attitude” (Michlewski 2014).[4] When we believe that people merely respond and react to stimulus, we cannot design for people to make informed choices or to take deliberate actions. And we may not get the results we are after, either.

In a BBC interview on the topic of nudging, David Halpern, the head of the UK Behavioral Economics Unit, acknowledged that a purely cognitive approach to nudging to stimulate a response does not work nearly as well as one that aids citizens’ understanding. [5] His example refers to experiments with getting UK citizens to pay taxes: ”People are more honest when they sign a form upfront but it turns out writing a letter in plain English is more effective.” In other words, when people are informed because they understand what they read and are asked to sign, they are more likely to comply with their social obligations. It is noteworthy that the keywords employed by the UK Behavioral Economic Unit “to make it attractive, easy, timely, and social” echo the very demands of human-centered design to create outcomes that are useful, usable and desirable to people.

When we care that our design efforts help make life better and easier for people, it is not sufficient to understand how the human brain reacts and responds. We also need to learn from citizens and work with them. It is not enough to think of citizens as mere subjects to be studied. It is necessary to co-design, co-develop, co-create and co-produce to understand problems not only from the view of the public organization or the lawmakers but also from the view of the everyday citizen. The promise is for policies to become more relevant, more efficient and more effective from intent through implementation. Nudging as a concept may not be so polarizing if it provided opportunities for citizens to “nudge” institutions and lawmakers, too, into changing their ways of going about business. We may also find that there are areas where people are not averse to being nudged–as long as they know and are aware that they are.

[1] Norman, D. (1988). *The Design of Everyday Things*, Basic Books New York: NY..

[2] Thaler, R. & Sunstein, C. (2009). *Nudge*, Penguin Books, New York: NY.

[3] Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Harper & Row, New York: NY.

[4] Michlewski, K. (2015). *Design Attitude*, Gower, UK.

[5] BBC Podcast Radio 4, *Nudge*, August 2014.

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